The education of the human race

> All these things are in certain respects true for the same reason that they are in certain respects false.
>
> Augustine[1]

Berlin, 1780

Editor's preface[2]

I published the first half of this essay in my *Contributions*.[3] I am now in a position to add the rest.

The author has placed himself on a hill, from which he believes he can see rather more than the prescribed course of his present day's journey.

But he does not call on any hasty traveller, who wishes only to reach his overnight lodging, to deviate from his path. He does not expect that the view which delights him should also delight every other eye.

And so, I should think, we could very well leave him to stand and wonder where he stands and wonders!

But what if he were to bring back from that immeasurable distance, which a soft evening glow neither wholly conceals nor wholly reveals, a pointer I have often felt in need of!

[1] Augustine, *Soliloquies* II.10; Augustine refers here to art, but taken out of context, his words apply to the content of the present work.

[2] Lessing never abandoned the pretence that he was merely the editor, not the author, of this work.

[3] See p. 79 above; the *Contributions* are the periodical referred to in note 1 on p. 61 above.

I mean this. – Why should we not see in all the positive religions simply the process whereby the human understanding in all places can alone develop, and will develop further still, instead of reacting with either mockery or anger to one of them? If nothing in the best of worlds deserves this scorn, this indignation on our part, why should the religions alone deserve it? Can God's hand be at work in everything except in our errors?

The education of the human race

§1

What education is to the individual human being, revelation is to the whole human race.

§2

Education is revelation imparted to the individual; and revelation is education which has been, and still is, imparted to the human race.

§3

I shall not consider here whether it is pedagogically useful to view education in this light. But in theology, it may certainly be of very great use, and may remove many difficulties, if one conceives of revelation as an education of the human race.

§4

Education gives the individual nothing which he could not also acquire by himself; it merely gives him what he could acquire by himself, but more quickly and more easily. Thus revelation likewise gives the human race nothing which human reason, left to itself, could not also arrive at; it merely gave it, and gives it, the most important of these things sooner.

§5

And just as education is not indifferent to the order in which it develops the human faculties, and just as it cannot impart everything to an individual

at once, so also has God had to observe a certain order, a certain measure, in his revelation.

§6

Even if the first human being was immediately equipped with a concept of the one and only God, this concept, being imparted and not independently acquired, could not possibly retain its purity for long. As soon as human reason, left to its own devices, began to work on it, it divided the one immeasurable being into several more measurable parts, giving each of these a separate designation.

§7

Thus polytheism and idolatry arose by a natural process. And who knows for how many millions of years human reason would have drifted aimlessly among those errors – despite the fact that some individuals at all times and places recognised them as such – had it not pleased God to give it a better direction by means of a new impulse.

§8

But as he no longer could or would reveal himself to each *individual human being*, he chose an *individual people* for his special education; and he chose precisely the most uncultivated and barbarous people, in order to start with it from the very beginning.

§9

This was the people of Israel, of whom we do not even know what kind of worship it had in Egypt. For such despised slaves were not allowed to participate in the cult of the Egyptians, and the God of their fathers had become completely unknown to them.

§10

Perhaps the Egyptians had expressly forbidden them to have any god or gods, plunging them into the belief that they had no god or gods

whatsoever, and that to have a god or gods was the exclusive right of the superior Egyptians – merely in order to tyrannise them with a greater semblance of justice. – Do Christians treat their slaves very differently even now? –

§11

To this uncouth people, God first let himself be made known as the God of its fathers, simply in order to acquaint and familiarise it with the idea that it, too, had a God of its own.

§12

Soon afterwards, through the miracles with which he led it out of Egypt and settled it in Canaan, he showed himself to it as a God more powerful than any other God.

§13

And by continuing to show himself to it as the most powerful of all – and this can only be *one* – he gradually accustomed it to the concept of the *One*.

§14

But how far did this concept of the One still fall short of the true transcendental concept of the One which reason learned at so late a stage to deduce with certainty from the concept of the infinite!

§15

But even if the superior members of the people were already drawing more or less close to the true concept of the One, the people at large were long unable to raise themselves to it; and this was the only true reason why they so often abandoned their one God and imagined they could find the One, i.e. the most powerful one, in some other god of another people.

§16

But what kind of *moral* education was so uncouth a people capable of, a people ill equipped for abstract thoughts and still so completely immersed in its childhood? – Of none other than that which is appropriate to the age of childhood, namely an education through immediate punishments and rewards of a sensuous kind.

§17

Thus here again, education and revelation coincide. God still could not give his people any other religion, any other law, than one through whose observance or non-observance it hoped or feared that it might become happy or unhappy here on earth. For its vision did not yet extend beyond this life. It knew of no immortality of the soul; it did not long for a life to come. But if God had revealed to it these things for which its reason was so little prepared, what else would this have been but the error of a vain pedagogue who prefers to push the child too far and boast of its progress instead of giving it thorough instruction?

§18

But what was the point, one may ask, of this education of so uncouth a people, a people with whom God had to make so completely new a beginning? My answer is this: so as to be able, in the course of time, to use individual members of this people with greater assurance as educators of all other peoples. In this people, he was educating the future educators of the human race. It was Jews who became these educators; and Jews alone, as men from a people educated in this way, were able to do so.

§19

To continue: for when the child had grown up with beatings and caresses and now reached the age of understanding, the father promptly thrust it out into foreign lands; and here it promptly recognised the good which it had enjoyed but failed to recognise in its father's house.

§20

While God led his chosen people through all the stages of a child's education, the other peoples of the earth had continued on their path by the light of reason. Most of them had lagged far behind the chosen people; only a few had advanced beyond it. And this is likewise the case with children who are allowed to grow up on their own: many remain completely backward, while some develop to an astonishing degree by themselves.

§21

But just as these more fortunate few do not disprove the use and necessity of education, neither do the few heathen peoples who up to now seemed to be ahead of the chosen people, even in their knowledge of God, do anything to disprove revelation. The child of education begins with slow but sure steps; it is late in overtaking the more fortunately organised child of nature; but it does overtake it, and then it can never again be overtaken by it.

§22

In the same way – leaving aside the doctrine of the unity of God, which is both present and absent in the books of the Old Testament – the fact that at least the doctrine of the soul's immortality and the related doctrine of reward and punishment in a future life are completely foreign to them does just as little to disprove the divine origin of these books. All the miracles and prophecies contained in them may nevertheless be perfectly genuine. For let us suppose that those doctrines were not only *absent* from it, but also *not* even *true* ; let us suppose that everything really comes to an end for human beings in this life: would the existence of God therefore be any the less demonstrated? Would God therefore be any the less free, and would it therefore befit him less, to take direct control of the temporal fate of any people among this transitory race? For the miracles he performed for the Jews, and the prophecies which he led them to record, were not just for the few mortal Jews in whose times they took place and were recorded: what he thereby intended concerned the entire Jewish people and the entire human race, which are perhaps destined to last eternally

here on earth, even if each individual Jew and each individual human being dies and departs for ever.

§23

Once again: the lack of those doctrines in the Old Testament writings does nothing to disprove their divinity. Moses was indeed sent by God, although the sanction of his law extended only to this life. For why should it extend further? He was sent only to the people of *Israel*, to the Israelites *of that time*; and his assignment was perfectly appropriate to the knowledge, capacities, and inclinations of the Israelites *of that time*, as well as to their *future* destiny. And that is sufficient.

§24

This is as far as *Warburton*[4] should have gone, and no further. But this learned man overstretched his bow. Not content that the lack of those doctrines did not detract from Moses' divine mission, he even saw their absence as proof of it. If only he had tried to base this proof on the suitability of such a law for such a people! But he took refuge instead in a miracle extending without interruption from Moses to Christ, by means of which God supposedly made each individual Jew just as happy or unhappy as his obedience or disobedience to the law deserved. This miracle, he claimed, made up for the lack of those doctrines, without which no state can subsist; and this substitution, he claimed, proves precisely what that lack seems at first sight to deny.

§25

How fortunate it was that *Warburton* could not find anything to substantiate or lend credibility to this continuous miracle, which he saw as the essential element of the Israelites' theocracy. For had he been able to do so, he would thereby have rendered the difficulty truly insuperable – for me at least. – For what was supposed to corroborate the divine nature of Moses' mission would have cast doubts on the very matter [i.e. the

[4] William Warburton, Bishop of Gloucester and author of *The Divine Legation of Moses* (1737–41).

immortality of the soul] which, while God did not wish to reveal it at this time, he certainly did not wish to make less comprehensible either.

§26

I shall explain myself by means of the counter-image to revelation. A primer for children may very well pass over in silence this or that important part of the science or art which it expounds, if the teacher judges that it is not yet appropriate to the capacities of the children for whom he is writing. But it must contain absolutely nothing which might block the children's way to the important items hitherto withheld, or point them in the wrong direction. Instead, all the avenues to these items must be carefully left open; and to direct the children away from even one of these avenues, or to delay their entry to it, would in itself be enough to turn the incomplete state of the primer into a fundamental fault.

§27

Thus, the doctrine of the soul's immortality and future retribution could also perfectly well be omitted from the writings of the Old Testament, those primers for the uncouth people of Israel who had so little practice in thinking; but they could on no account contain anything which might even delay the people for whom they were written on their way to this great truth. And what, to say the least, would have *delayed* them more than a promise of that miraculous retribution in this life, coming from him who makes no promises which he does not keep?

§28

For even if the unequal distribution of goods in this life, which seems to take so little account of virtue and vice, scarcely furnishes the strongest proof of the soul's immortality and of an afterlife in which this problem might be resolved, it is at least certain that, without this problem, the human understanding would still be far from discovering better and more rigorous proofs, and perhaps might never have discovered them at all. For what incentive would it have to look for these better proofs? Mere curiosity?

§29

This or that Israelite might well, of course, have extended to each individual member of the state those divine promises and threats which applied to the state as a whole, and have firmly believed that anyone who is pious must also be happy and that anyone who is, or becomes, unhappy must be paying the penalty for his misdeeds – a penalty which would at once be transformed into a blessing as soon as he desisted from the latter. Such a person seems to have written the Book of Job, for its plan is entirely in this spirit. –

§30

But daily experience could not possibly confirm this belief, otherwise a people with such experience would have lost *for ever* the opportunity to recognise and assimilate a truth with which it was not yet familiar. For if the pious man were absolutely happy, and if it were also an essential part of his happiness that his contentment should not be disturbed by terrible thoughts of death, and that he should die old and 'full of days',[5] how could he then long for another life? and how could he reflect on something which he did not long for? But if the pious man did not reflect on it, who else would do so? The villain? someone who felt the punishment of his misdeeds and, if he cursed this life, would so willingly have renounced any other?

§31

It was far less important that this or that Israelite directly and explicitly denied the immortality of the soul and future retribution on the grounds that the law made no mention of them. Denial by an individual – even if that individual were a Solomon[6] – did not retard the progress of the common understanding, and was already a proof in itself that the people had now moved a great step nearer to the truth. For the individual only denies what several are contemplating; and to contemplate something about which no one had previously been in the least concerned is half way to knowledge.

[5] Genesis 35.29. [6] Ecclesiastes 3.19–22.

§32

Let us also admit that it is a heroic [kind of] obedience to obey the laws of God merely because they are God's laws, and not because he has promised to reward those who observe them here and in the hereafter – to observe them even if one already despairs utterly of any future reward and is not entirely certain of a temporal reward either.

§33

If a people has been educated in this heroic obedience towards God, must it not be destined, and more able than any others, to execute God's quite specific intentions? – Let the soldier who shows blind obedience to his leader also be convinced of his leader's sagacity, and then say what this leader may not dare to execute with his help! –

§34

In its Jehovah, the Jewish people had as yet venerated rather the mightiest than the wisest of all gods; it had as yet feared him as a jealous God rather than loved him: this, too, is a proof that the concepts it had of its One supreme God were not exactly the right concepts we should have of God. But the time had now come for these concepts to be expanded, refined, and corrected, for which purpose God employed a perfectly natural means, a better and more accurate yardstick against which the Jewish people now had occasion to assess him.

§35

Instead of assessing him, as before, only against the wretched idols of the small and uncouth tribes of the neighbourhood, with whom they lived in constant rivalry, they began, in their captivity under the wise Persian,[7] to measure him against the being of all beings as recognised and venerated by a more practised reason.

§36

Revelation had guided their reason, and now reason suddenly illuminated their revelation.

[7] Cyrus II (the Great), ruler of Persia 550–529 BC.

§37

That was the first reciprocal service which the two performed for one another; and such a reciprocal influence is so far from unbefitting to the author of both that without it, one of the two would be superfluous.

§38

The child sent into foreign lands saw other children who knew more and lived with greater propriety, and asked itself in shame: why do I not know this too? why do I not live in this way too? should I not have been taught this and urged to behave in this way in my father's house? Then it once again consults its primers, with which it had long since lost patience, in order to put the blame on them. But lo and behold! It realises that it is not the books which are to blame, but that it is itself entirely to blame for not having long since acquired precisely this knowledge and lived in precisely this way.

§39

Now that the Jews, on the strength of the purer Persian doctrine, recognised their Jehovah not just as the greatest of all national deities but as God; now that they could the more readily find him as such and show him to others in their sacred writings, which they now consulted once more, because he really was present in them; and now that they expressed – or were at least enjoined in these writings to feel – as great an aversion to all sensuous representations of God as the Persians had ever felt: was it any wonder that they found favour in the eyes of Cyrus with a divine worship which, though he perceived it as far inferior to pure Sabaism,[8] he also recognised as far superior to the crude idolatries which had replaced it in the land which the Jews had left?

§40

Thus enlightened [*erleuchtet*] with regard to their own unrecognised treasures, they came home and became a quite different people, whose first concern was to make this enlightenment [*Erleuchtung*] permanent among

[8] Ancient Semitic cult of the heavenly bodies.

themselves. Soon, there could be no further thought of apostasy and idolatry among them. For one may well become unfaithful to a national god, but never to God once he has been recognised as such.

§41

The theologians have tried to explain this complete change in the Jewish people in various ways, and one of them, who has shown very well how inadequate all these various explanations are, finally claimed that the true reason for this change was 'the manifest fulfilment of the proclaimed and recorded prophecies concerning the Babylonian captivity and the release therefrom'.[9] But even this reason can only be true in so far as it presupposes those refined concepts of God which had only now been attained. The Jews must only now have realised that working miracles and prophesying the future are the prerogative of God alone, whereas previously, they had also ascribed such powers to false idols, which is precisely why miracles and prophecies had hitherto made only a weak and transitory impression on them.

§42

No doubt the Jews had also learned more about the doctrine of the soul's immortality among the Chaldeans and Persians. They became more familiar with it in the schools of the Greek philosophers in Egypt.

§43

But since this doctrine did not have the same relevance to their Holy Scriptures as did the doctrine of God's unity and attributes; since the latter had been crassly overlooked in them by this sensual people, whereas the doctrine of immortality still had to be looked for; and since the doctrine of immortality also required *preparatory exercises*, whereas only *allusions* and *pointers* had been available – for all these reasons, the belief in immortality

[9] The source of this quotation has not been identified.

could naturally never be shared by the entire people. It was and remained the belief only of a particular sect[10] within them.

§44

What I call a *preparatory exercise* for the doctrine of immortality might include, for example, the divine threat to punish the misdeeds of the father upon the children down to the third and fourth generation.[11] This accustomed the fathers to live in thought with their most distant progeny, and to feel in advance the misfortune which they had brought upon these innocent people.

§45

What I call an *allusion* is something which should merely arouse curiosity and elicit a question – as, for example, the frequently used expression 'to be gathered to one's fathers'[12] to denote death.

§46

What I call a *pointer* is something which contains some kind of germ from which a truth hitherto withheld may be developed. Christ's inference from the description of God as 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'[13] was of this kind. This pointer does, however, seem to me capable of development into a rigorous proof.

§47

Such preparatory exercises, allusions, and pointers constitute the *positive* perfection of a primer, just as the above-mentioned quality of not blocking or rendering more difficult the way to those truths which are still withheld was its *negative* perfection.

§48

Add to all this the figures of speech and the style:

[10] The Pharisees. [11] Exodus 20.5. [12] See Genesis 49.29. [13] Matthew 22.31–32.

(1) Those abstract truths which could not readily be omitted are represented by means of allegories and instructive individual examples related as real occurrences. Of this kind are the image of creation as the dawn of day; the origin of moral evil in the tale of the forbidden tree; the origin of linguistic diversity in the story of the tower of Babel, etc.

§49

(2) The style is sometimes plain and simple, sometimes poetic, full of tautologies throughout, but of the kind which exercise one's acumen by appearing at one moment to say something different while yet saying the same thing, and at another to say the same thing while basically meaning (or possibly meaning) something different –

§50

– and you have all the good qualities of a primer, for children as well as for a childlike people.

§51

But every primer is only for a certain age. To continue using it for longer than intended with a child who has outgrown it is harmful. For in order to do this in at all useful a way, one must read more into it than is present and introduce more than it can hold. One must look for and invent too many allusions and pointers, extract too much from the allegories, interpret the examples too circumstantially, and press the words too hard. This gives the child a petty, warped, and hairsplitting understanding; it makes the child secretive, superstitious, and full of contempt for everything comprehensible and straightforward.

§52

The very way in which the rabbis treated their sacred books! The very character which they thereby imparted to the spirit of their people!

§53

A better instructor must come and snatch the exhausted primer from the child's grasp. Christ came.[14]

§54

That portion of the human race which God had wished to include in *one* educational plan was now ready for the second great step in its education. But he had only wished to include in this plan that portion of humanity which by its language, activities, government, and other natural and political circumstances was already united in itself.

§55

That is, this portion of the human race had come so far in the exercise of its reason that it required, and could make use of, nobler and worthier motives for moral action than the temporal rewards and punishments which had hitherto been its guide. The child becomes a boy. Sweets and playthings give way to a burgeoning desire to become as free, as honoured, and as happy as its elder siblings.

§56

The better members of that portion of the human race had already long been accustomed to let themselves be governed by a *shadow* of such nobler motives. The Greek or Roman would do anything to live on after this life, if only in the memory of his fellow-citizens.

§57

It was time for the expectation of another *true* life after this life to gain an influence on their actions.

§58

And so Christ became the first *reliable* and *practical* teacher of the immortality of the soul.

[14] The first section of the work, as published in 1777, ends here; Lessing published the complete work, including the remaining forty-seven paragraphs, in 1780.

§59

The first *reliable* teacher. – Reliable through the prophecies which seemed fulfilled in him; reliable through the miracles he performed; reliable through his own revival after a death by which he had set the seal on his own doctrine. Whether we can still prove this revival and these miracles now is a question which I leave open – just as I leave it open who the person of this Christ was. All this may have been important then for the *acceptance* of his doctrine; but it is no longer so important now for the recognition of its truth.

§60

The first *practical* teacher. – For it is one thing to conjecture, desire, and believe in the immortality of the soul as a philosophical speculation, and another to direct one's inner and outer actions accordingly.

§61

And the first to teach this, at least, was Christ. For although the belief that evil actions will eventually be punished in the afterlife had already been introduced among many peoples before his time, this referred only to such actions as were prejudicial to civil society and were therefore already subject to civil penalties as well. To recommend an inner purity of the heart with a view to another life was reserved for him alone.

§62

His disciples faithfully propagated this doctrine. And if they had no other merit than that of having given more general currency among various peoples to a truth which Christ seemed to have destined only for the Jews, they would on this count alone have to be reckoned among the supporters and benefactors of the human race.

§63

If, however, they combined this one great doctrine with other doctrines whose truth was less evident and whose utility was less considerable,

how could this be otherwise? Let us not blame them for this, but rather seriously investigate whether even these additional doctrines have not become a new *guiding impulse* for human reason.

§64

It is, at least, already clear from experience that the New Testament Scriptures in which these doctrines were eventually recorded have served, and continue to serve, as the second, better primer for the human race.

§65

For seventeen hundred years, they have exercised the human understanding more than any other books and illuminated it more than any other books, if only through the light which the human understanding itself brought into them.

§66

No other book could possibly have become so universally known among such diverse peoples; and the fact that such utterly disparate mentalities occupied themselves with this same book has unquestionably done more to further the progress of the human understanding than if each people had had a primer for its own specific use.

§67

It was also imperative that each people should regard this book for a time as the *non plus ultra* of its knowledge. For that is also how a boy should see his primer in the first instance, lest his impatience to be done with it should rush him on to things for which he has not yet laid the foundations.

§68

And what is still of the utmost importance now: – take care, you more able individual who stamp and fret on the last page of this primer, take care not to let your weaker classmates detect what you scent, or already begin to see!

§69

– Until they have caught up with you, those weaker classmates! Rather go back again to this primer yourself, and consider whether what you regard as procedural formulas or pedagogical expedients are not in fact something more.

§70

In the childhood of the human race, you have seen from the doctrine of God's unity that God also reveals purely rational truths directly – or permits and encourages purely rational truths to be taught for a time as directly revealed truths – in order to disseminate them more quickly and establish them more firmly.

§71

In the boyhood of the human race, you find it is the same with the doctrine of the soul's immortality. It is *preached* in the second, better primer, rather than *taught* as the result of human reasoning.

§72

Just as we are now able to dispense with the Old Testament for the doctrine of God's unity, and just as we are also gradually beginning to be able to dispense with the New Testament for the doctrine of the soul's immortality, might there not also be further truths of this kind adumbrated in the latter which we must wonder at as revelations until human reason has learned to deduce them from its other established truths, and to link them with these?

§73

For example, the doctrine of the Trinity. – What if this doctrine were at last to lead the human understanding, after endless vagaries to one side and the other, on to the right path to recognise that God cannot possibly be *one* in the sense that finite things are *one*, and that his unity must also be a transcendental unity which does not exclude a kind of

plurality? – Must God not at least have the most complete representation of himself, i.e. a representation which contains everything which is present within him? But would it include everything within him if it contained only a representation, only a possibility of his *necessary reality*, as well as of his other qualities? This possibility exhausts the essence of his other qualities. But does it also exhaust that of his necessary reality? I think not. – Consequently, God can either have no complete representation of himself, or this complete representation is just as necessarily real as he himself is, etc. – Admittedly, my own image in a mirror is only an empty representation of me, because it contains only as much of me as is present in the rays of light which fall on its surface. But if this image contained *everything*, everything without exception which I myself possess, would it then still be an empty representation, or not rather a true duplication of myself? – If I believe that I can recognise a similar duplication in God, I am perhaps not so much in error as that language is inadequate for my concepts; and this much at least remains forever indisputable, that those who wished to popularise the idea could scarcely have expressed themselves more comprehensibly and fittingly than by describing it as a *Son* whom God begets from eternity.

§74

And the doctrine of original sin. – What if everything should finally convince us that man, at the *first and lowest* stage of his humanity, is quite simply not sufficiently in control of his actions to be able to follow moral laws?

§75

And the doctrine of the Son's satisfaction. – What if everything should finally compel us to assume that God, despite that original incapacity of man, nevertheless chose rather to give him moral laws and to forgive him all transgressions in consideration of his *Son* – i.e. in consideration of the independently existing sum of his own perfections, in comparison with which and in which every imperfection of the individual disappears – than not to give him them and thereby to exclude him from all moral happiness, which is inconceivable without moral laws?

§76

Let it not be objected that such rational speculations on the mysteries of religion are forbidden. – The word 'mystery', in early Christian times, meant something quite different from what we understand by it now; and the development of revealed truths into truths of reason is absolutely necessary if they are to be of any help to the human race. When they were revealed, of course, they were not yet truths of reason; but they were revealed in order to become such truths. They were, so to speak, the result of the calculation which the mathematics teacher announces in advance, in order to give his pupils some idea of what they are working towards. If the pupils were satisfied with knowing the result in advance, they would never learn to calculate, and would frustrate the intention with which the good master gave them a guideline to help them with their work.

§77

And why should we not nevertheless be guided by a religion whose historical truth, one may think, looks so dubious, to better and more precise conceptions of the divine being, of our own nature, and of our relations with God, which human reason would never have arrived at on its own?

§78

It is not true that speculations on these things have ever done damage and been disadvantageous to civil society. – This reproach should be aimed not at these speculations, but at the folly and tyranny of suppressing them and begrudging them to those who pursued them on their own initiative.

§79

On the contrary, such speculations – whatever individual results they may lead to – are unquestionably the *most fitting* exercises of all for the human understanding, so long as the human heart is at all capable of loving virtue for its everlasting salutary consequences.

§80

For given this selfishness of the human heart, to exercise the understanding only on what concerns our bodily needs would in effect be to blunt it rather than to sharpen it. It must at all costs be exercised on spiritual objects if it is to attain complete enlightenment [*Aufklärung*] and generate that purity of heart which enables us to love virtue for its own sake.

§81

Or shall the human race never arrive at these ultimate stages of enlightenment [*Aufklärung*] and purity? Never?

§82

Never? – Let me not contemplate this blasphemy, all-bountiful One! – Education has its *goal*, for the race no less than for the individual. Whatever is educated is educated for a purpose.

§83

The flattering prospects which are held out to the youth, the honour and prosperity which are dangled before him: what are they but means of educating him to be a man who, even when these prospects of honour and prosperity vanish away, will still be able to do his duty?

§84

If this is the aim of human education, can divine education fall short of it? Can nature fail to achieve with the whole what art achieves with the individual? Blasphemy! Blasphemy!

§85

No – it will certainly come, the time of fulfilment, when man, the more convinced his understanding feels of an ever better future, will nevertheless have no need to borrow the motives for his actions from this future; when he will do good because it is good, not because it brings arbitrary

rewards which previously served only to fix and fortify his capricious gaze so that he might recognise the inner and better rewards of such action.

§86

It will certainly come, the time of a *new, eternal gospel*,[15] which is promised to us even in the primers of the New Covenant.

§87

Perhaps even certain enthusiasts [*Schwärmer*] of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries[16] caught a glimpse of this new eternal gospel, and erred only in proclaiming that its coming was so close at hand.

§88

Perhaps their *three ages of the world* were not just an empty fancy; and they certainly had no ill intentions when they taught that the New Covenant must become just as *antiquated* as the Old has become. For them too, it was still the same economy of the same God. It was still – to put it in my terms – the same plan of the universal education of the human race.

§89

– Except that they were in too much of a hurry, and believed that, without enlightenment [*Aufklärung*] or preparation, they could at one stroke turn their contemporaries, who had scarcely emerged from their childhood, into men worthy of their *third age*.

§90

And that was precisely what made them enthusiasts. The enthusiast often has very accurate insights into the future – but he cannot wait for this future to come. He wishes it to come more quickly, and to do so through his agency. What nature takes thousands of years to prepare is expected to

[15] Cf. Revelation 14.6.
[16] Lessing alludes here to the ideas of Joachim of Flora or Fiore (c. 1132–1202) and his followers.

come to fruition at the precise moment of his existence. For what use is it to him if what he perceives as better does not become better in his lifetime? Will he come back [to life]? Does he expect to do so? – It is strange that this enthusiasm alone remains out of fashion among the enthusiasts!

§91

Go your inscrutable way, eternal providence! But let me not despair of you because of this inscrutability. – Let me not despair of you, even if your steps should seem to me to go backward! – It is not true that the shortest line is always the straight one.

§92

You have so much to take with you on your eternal way! So many diversions to make! And what if it were as good as certain that the great, slow-moving wheel which brings the [human] race closer to its perfection is only set in motion by smaller, faster wheels, each of which makes its own contribution to this end?

§93

Exactly so! Every individual – one sooner, another later – must first have traversed the same route whereby the race attains its perfection. But can he have traversed it in one and the same lifetime? Can he, in this life, have been both a sensual Jew and a spiritual Christian? Can he have overtaken both of them in this same life?

§94

Well, surely not! – But why should every individual not have been present more than once in this world?

§95

Is this hypothesis so ridiculous just because it is the oldest one? Because the human understanding hit upon it at once, before it was distracted and weakened by the sophistry of the schools?

§96

Why should I not likewise have already taken all the steps here towards my perfection which merely temporal rewards and punishments can lead mankind to take?

§97

And why should I not, on another occasion, have taken all those steps which the prospects of eternal rewards give us so strong an incentive to take?

§98

Why should I not come back as often as I am able to acquire new knowledge and new accomplishments? Do I take away so much on one occasion that it may not be worth the trouble coming back?

§99

Should I not come back because of this? – Or because I forget that I have been here before? It is as well that I should forget. The memory of my previous states would only permit me to make poor use of the present one. And does what I *must* forget for the present have to be forgotten for ever?

§100

Or am I not to return because too much time would be lost in so doing? – Lost? – And what exactly do I have to lose? Is not the whole of eternity mine?